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ABSTRACT

Social studies and language arts teachers can enliven and enrich history studies through personalization. This approach can empower children to see history itself as having a spirit as well as a body. Reading and writing activities should allow students to see history as the kind of study that opens the individual up to different visions. Children studying history should not have to memorize faceless events and nameless people; rather they should be permitted to personalize history by comparing others' lives to their own and seeing similarities and dissimilarities. Granting children the opportunity to see multiple perspectives could mean allowing them to analyze texts which are there for probing, to recount personal stories as part of history, and even to read picture books whose accessibility makes them good starters in social studies and language arts classrooms. Finally, children will begin to see that reality is often shaped by writers and by the interaction between reader and text. (Twenty-one references, including a selection of historical biographies and fiction appropriate for personalized instruction, are attached.) (KEH)

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CHOPPING DOWN THE CHERRY TREE

Once upon a time there was a boy who said, "I cannot tell a lie" and he was the Father of our Country or was it "Once upon a time there was a boy who rode miles to return a nickle" or was it a dime or was it "Once upon a time there was a boy who carried his books in a wheelbarrel and invented the lightning rod" or was it electricity, and the boy came from Philadelphia which is in Pennsylvania which means Penn's woods because sylvan means woods, and he also did something with the Declaration of Independence, but his handwriting wasn't as big as John Hancock's. And . . . and . . .that all happened before Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves at Gettysburg (which is spelled without an h not like Pittsburgh) saying, "Four score and seven years ago our Fathers brought onto this competent a new nation conceited in liberty . . ." but it was . . . it all happened a long time ago after all those famous battles like Lexington and Concord and Valley Forge where a shot was heard round the world, and Paul Revere went riding riding riding.

I begin this essay with nonsensical insanities, but I am not insane. The way I learned first social studies, then American history, and then Pennsylvania history was fraught with inanity and insanity: names and dates and places I was to memorize, swallowing history whole like a snake swallows a rat; and then,

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without even enjoying the repast, I was to throw it all back up onto pieces of paper for reasons I couldn't fathom except I wanted a good grade so I wrote neatly and spelled correctly. And in third and fourth and eighth grade, trying to decipher meaning out of the thick history books which fell onto my desk with the weight of unquestionable solid rock, I grew up believing that this history, which made absolutely no sense to me and was indeed painful to consume so quickly did I have to eat my meals of bloodless fact and figure, had to be true. I was a fundamentalist when it came to history, and yet I lacked the fervent conviction of the fundamentalist. Paradoxically, in my mind, history was truth and also totally unreal. I never related to the figures I so dutifully memorized. They were as abstract as numerical figures. They were also somehow mythical people, mainly white males, similar to the kinds of heroes I saw on TV. They, themselves, never had any history of their own in my mind. They popped into the world full-grown to shout things like "Give me liberty or give me death."

Consequently, I was deathly bored by history. That was twenty eight years ago. Some of my own college students who were in public school classrooms long after I sat merely warming the seat area on my plaid pleated kilt, come to me feeling no differently. When asked to write about their experiences with history, they say, and I quote a student, "As a child I don't remember liking history much . . . I only remember when things happened. California Gold Rush, Vietnam, Watergate is very confusing, and the presidents are very confusing." Vietnam, in this student's mind, is no different than the California Gold Rush. Both are merely frantic times which came into being to aid teachers in their task of thwarting that student's existence. I wouldn't be surprised if this

student has thought, as I have so often whispered to myself, "If only there were less history, there would be less for me to memorize." Another student who may well have felt the same kind of powerlessness as I felt when I was confronted by the weight of absolute historical truth, said, "I never liked history that much--I could never remember all of the dates, and I never understood how all of it fit together--I never managed to get an overall view of everything."

I think of myself. I think of my students. I think of my five year old son who will come into the social studies class all prepared to meet American war heroes as mythically invincible and non-human as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; and I shudder. However, I do not feel all is lost.

Perhaps my optimism in the face of all this has to do with my conviction that in many classrooms across the country traditional ways of learning history are changing. Learning is changing. And so I write this essay: to dialogue with teachers who may still be using traditional methods of teaching history, to mention research I have encountered which may be of benefit to teachers in the language arts and social studies classes, and to suggest effective activities which I have used in my classroom and which teachers have shared with me.

Students learn when they become personally involved. As teachers we can move our students into an almost intimate involvement with history by our first being aware of and actively confronting not merely the obvious limited vision of traditional texts but the less obvious linguistic barriers set up by what has previously been accepted as the proper language in which to transmit history. For language has made many students passive learners. Indeed, a good deal of my life I behaved like a passive learner. When I read texts, particularly

history texts, I didn't interact with what I was learning. How could I interact when I never saw an author behind the text? How could I interact when many authors simply didn't allow me to see them because then they would admit that, in part, history is subjective; and so they hid their own egos behind language that was clearly impersonal. The language of fact is third person, and it admits to no ambiguities. It is a language that props up the clay feet of our traditional historical gods. It is basal reader language. Passive reading always makes for passive writing. But then traditional books wanted that. A child reads the exalted history of an Abraham Lincoln or a George Washington and he or she sees impersonal beings who appear powerful not merely because of deed but because these figures seem so impersonal. How can one question a figure who is set up on a pedestal too high for any child to reach: a figure totally unlike the child who doesn't always know what to do, and who knows the full force of being vulnerable and less than powerful.

I never personalized history nor had I seen history as a kind of people story composed of individuals who came from families, who lived on blocks, who had personalized visions, who went to war, and fought, and died, and had mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers who cried over their deaths. My teachers hadn't been fortunate enough to read Leslie Williams' article "Diverse Gifts: Multicultural Education in the Kindergarten" which suggests ways of beginning the process of personalization within the kindergarten classroom. Children, Williams suggests, can read books devoted to grandparent/grandchild relationships. They can talk about "the special names they have for their grandparents, and how they felt when a grandparent died" (2). They can invite grandparents to the classroom which becomes, by this exploration, a

multicultural classroom where history is at one and the same time personal and global in nature.

Williams speaks of kindergarteners. Students of all ages can learn or re-learn history by starting with the accessible. Use some type of encyclopedia, and you get encyclopedia language. You get a child who thinks a good essay is one which has a lot of words in it. (Some of my students chuckled over their own way of approaching history. The longer they sat copying out The World Book the more they thought they were doing a good history research paper. No matter they were plagiarizing. No matter they weren't thinking. They were putting all the right facts down.) Start with the easily accessible such as a picture book devoted to historical fiction and you get a child who can talk and write about history--who can not merely synthesize data but challenge it and recreate it, in part in the child's own image.[1] For this reason I advocate usage of picture books even in the middle and secondary classrooms: they provide good prompts to get students from all grades in a personalizing history frame of mind. A student who reads Eloise Greenfield's Nathaniel Talking sees a young urban black boy, a contemporary boy full of spirit and nineties philosophy. The book begins with Nathaniel rapping. Through Nathaniel children can explore their own philosophies, how they may be different or similar to their parents. They can explore slang changes. They can interview their parents on key words their parents used when they were children. They can examine what slang or colloquialisms say of a culture.

We personalize history by exploring language and customs: the ways we eat and dress and build our homes, the ways we present our homes on our blocks. Ina Friedman's How My Parents Learned to Eat, a text quite often used by second

grade teachers, allows children to understand custom transmission and the embarrasment one can feel when meeting up with someone who has different customs. The story itself is about a girl whose father is American and whose mother is Japanese. They meet when the man is a sailor in Japan. They fall in love; yet both are afraid to ask the other out because the father doesn't know how to eat with chopsticks; the mother doesn't know how to use a fork and a knife and a spoon. There is a humorous section where the mother learns to eat as what she thinks an American eats. However she learns the European way of eating. Finally the two overcome their fears. The girl integrates both styles of eating. In her house some days they eat the Japanese way. Some days they eat the American way.

How people eat, what they eat, the order in which children are served and what they are served is directly influenced by when and where they live. Students of mine who have read Elizabeth Speare's The Witch of Blackbird Pond have remarked about the horrible way in which mealtime is lead in the Cruff household. Prudence, not only a Puritan child, but the child of a Puritanical mother, is "not even allowed to sit at board with them [father and mother], but kept behind her mother where she had to eat standing up the stingy portion they handed back to her" (16). Students in the classroom can take this one aspect--eating habits--and feel the pulse of historical change. They can expand outward from familial history to the history of one area by reading Alice and Martin Provensen's Shaker Lane, a picture books for all ages which is, as the dust jacket says, "a sharply observed comment on changing American society."

Shaker Lane is a block in transition, a street filled with dogs and cats and families bursting out of their homes, a street where lawns are extensions of living rooms or garages. Children in the second grade, after reading this book or having it read to them, can explore the make-up of their block; they can interview different people and get block gossip, gossip which isn't simply gossip but a part of oral history. They can find out how their block has changed. (At a recent NCTE Conference a second grade teacher who was listening to a version of this paper indicated that she did use Shaker Lane in the manner I have indicated. She also uses many picture books for science and history studies.) Middle school children can examine city politics. Shaker Lane is bought up by the county. People are paid for their land. In its place is the suburban Reservoir Road. Under the picture of people in their pools, a man mowing his lawn and boys playing basketball is the comment: "You wouldn't know the place". How do blocks change? How do people hold onto a kind of pride in where they live? These are questions which allow us all to see forces behind history and relative versions of historical change.

By reading simple picture books devoted to some aspect of historical fiction; by engaging in research, and by sharing familial histories, students make the first step in seeing themselves within history. Not merely do they see themselves inside history. They see themselves as researchers, as history writers and author-creators who are not made powerless by fact, but who interact with facts. Consequently, they write. They write in their own language. They express their own views which are based upon understanding and not parroting others' views.

In my own Writing in the Elementary School classroom I had my students talk about their histories: wonderful stories their parents and grandparents related about their births; names not only they used for their grandparents but names they were called as they grew through their own historical life. I suggested how the names which I called my son revealed his growth in time. When he was three months, he was Pup-pup the dog because his tongue hung out and he drooled. Then he was lambkies and numbkies, and he grew to be Aara-noo-noos and then Aaron and one day he will wish to call himself Aaron Emanuel. My students fondly spoke of names their Dutch or German grandparents called them. Feeling personally involved, these same students realized a number of things: that their lives, previously conceived as having no historical validity, formed the basis upon which they could study history; that they were historical beings and, more importantly, that history is relative to who recounts it. The last point was brought home to all of us when one of my students laughingly related how her grandmother and her mother persist in retelling the story of an accident they once had. In her grandmother's story, the older woman is a heroine who saves the younger. Her mother tells it differently.

After confronting multiple truths in their own lives, students can see how history is the documentation of truths which, depending upon the teller, change. And one group may well view another's truths as totally false. I think here particularly of approaches to American Studies, especially the white settlement of the West.

Michael James and James Zarrillo, suggesting possible ways of using Children's Literature, particularly historical fiction alongside nonfiction, to enrich a child's sense of multiple perspectives, offer these lesson plans.

Children take a sociological approach to a tribe i.e. the Sioux. It is best, the authors suggest, that children narrow their focus to one tribe at a time. They read Paul Gobles' work such as Lone Bull's Horse Raid and Buffalo Woman which provide children with the Native American point of view. Reading of heroic deeds an Indian might want to experience or gets a chance to experience, children personalize by telling stories of "heroic exploits at school and home" (155). In this way the Native American's experience takes on a universality. Every child wants to be a hero. How a child fantasizes heroism or enacts it through rituals and ceremonies distinguishes one culture from another. Children also can concretely experience history by doing hands-on projects. They can, suggest the authors, make "dioramas of a Sioux village" or "write legends similar to Gobles' Buffalo Woman (155). In a similar vein I suggest that children can read Byrd Baiyor's book of poetry They Put on Masks. They can make masks, explore the meaning of Indian masks and probe reasons behind masks in American culture.

Having some basic knowledge of a tribe, children can advance to the more sophisticated perception of history's relativity. They can explore books which force them to see how the recounting of an event is influenced by the viewer's own cultural history. James and Zarrillo say that children should read texts such as Little House on the Prairie, a book which, while revealing the author's feelings about how she lived on the prairie, also reveals what I imagine to be the author's own deep seated fear and prejudices against Indians (here filtered through the lens of the little girl Laura). Zarrillo's rationale for using this text rather than censoring it in the classroom makes sense. Children see, by examining the young Laura's reaction, how a pioneer child viewed Indians. The

authors also suggest, as an activity, that "children rewrite scenes from Wilder . . . employing a native American point of view" (156). This places the child in the shoes of another, making that child see with the eyes of another. A good companion piece, I think, is Elizabeth Speare's The Sign of the Beaver, a text typically used by fourth grade teachers. Here children can see what it's like for a white boy to suddenly realize the horror of his prejudice and the meaning of cultural bias. Feeling inept and being unschooled in the ways of the woods, Matt, the son of white settlers who must leave him alone for a time, realizes how much one's perception about wisdom are defined by time and place: what is wise in one place is stupid and foolish in another. Moreover, how one culture defines such things as wisdom, politeness and civilized ways of behavior can be totally antithetical to how another culture defines and puts into practice such abstract terms. Alone in Indian country Elizabeth Speare's main character Matt, learns from the Native American boy Attean. He learns what is the wisdom of the woods, and he begins to explore the possibilities of viewing truths in many ways: "He had never questioned that story [Robinson Crusoe]. Like Robinson Crusoe, he had thought it natural and right that the wild man should be the white man's slave. Was there perhaps another possibility? The thought was new and troubling" (44). As for further involving children in hands-on projects with historitcal fiction texts, a fourth grade teacher related to me that she had her students make treaties much as Attean's grandfather verbally made with Matt.

Similarly, Ann McGovern's text . . . If You Lived with the Sioux Indians allows children to explore and confront prejudices. Written in a question and answer format, this book begins with a question that forces the reader to

explore misconceptions: "What did the Sioux Indians look like?" McGovern answers: "The Sioux Indians did not have red skin. No Indians did. The color of their skin went from very light to deep brown. The name redskin came from the red paint the Indians used on their faces when they went to war" (3). Actually, this text is good for a KWL research type project. Children first can brainstorm on what they know about Indian customs (the K part of research). They can, during this time, list the kinds of unconscious prejudices they have picked up not only in their readings but through oral transmission (phrases the typical American child learns which are loaded with prejudicial innuendos i. e. "Don't be wild like an Indian), tv shows American children watch and games they play with serve to subtly perpetuate such prejudices. Students can draw up a list of what they want to know (the W section) and, as they research, they can document what they learned (the L) section. All along they erase (as erroneous conception and not fact) or clarify (as partial knowlege) or revise the list of known facts. All along they find new areas to know. Finally groups take categories and write up reports on their category.

All along, as children explore the very personal kind of literature which marks historical fiction, as they personalize history by comparing others' lives to their own and see similarities and dissimilarities, they are to read non-fiction. In this way, as Evelyn Freeman and Linda Levstik suggest, children learn how to evaluate historical validity. Some questions which they can raise studying these two kinds of texts are: "What interpretation of history is represented in the story, and especially in the ideas and actions of the main character(s)? How has the author used character to present point of view and

how might point of view change with character? How much invention is involved in the historical information?" (Freeman and Levstik 330).

Finally, I mentioned two areas of American history which can easily be approached through a study in multiple perspectives. American slavery also offers a wide variety of perspectives. When I studied the Civil War, I studied about Abraham Lincoln. The slaves were just that: 3rd person plurals with no individuality. They were receivers of freedom subordinate in importance to the battles won and lost, the names of famous generals and such awesome historical moments as the burning of Atlanta. A child learning of that period can now read Julius Lester's To Be a Slave, a text for Jr. High students which is a compilation of slave testimonies whose force itself comes out of the personal. A student can then compare this book with Paula Fox's Slave Dancer or Belinda Hurmence's A Girl Called Boy, a book for Middle School or Jr. High students. Blanche Overtha Yancey, or Boy as she's called, is a modern black girl who doesn't care much for heritage, that is until she finds herself a slave. Experiencing slavery changes everything. A fourth grader, approaching the last text, can imagine how it would be if he or she was thrust back in time. An older student can examine how we all look at our heritage; what preconceptions and misconceptions we have; ways in which we may well act superior, feeling that, if we lived back then, certainly we would have behaved differently. In particular, I read this book and thought about how I used to ask this question: "How come none of the Jews fought in the camps?" I never once placed myself there nor did I know much fact. I had seen countless TV programs where Jews stood huddled near trains. Freeman and Levstik, comparing Secret Railway, The Slave Dancer, and A Girl Called Boy, suggest: "They [students] can be

introduced to the controversy over The Slave Dancer's portrayal of blacks, and can also read some of the slave narratives that provide much of the inspiration for A Girl Called Boy" (331).

We come to history replete with our own historical baggage: personal and cultural preferences and prejudices. This colors and discolors the way we read history, but no traditional history writer wanted us to realize this. And so, if we don't explore, we remain ignorant. The kinds of activities I suggest allow a student to see history as the kind of study that opens one up to different visions. A child studying history doesn't memorize faceless events and nameless people. A child experiences history as something personal. He or she is aided by seeing multiple perspectives, by sharing research and seeing how teammates come to decisions, by analyzing texts which are there for probing, by recounting personal stories as part of history, and by even reading picture books whose accessibility make for good starters in social studies and language arts classrooms. Paradoxically, our granting children the opportunity to see multiple perspectives doesn't make them feel that nothing is real, but rather they see everything as having some meaning. They see that reality is often shaped by writers or at least it is given shape by writers. They see that history changes because, in part, writers change. Moreover, all this is complicated by the fact that reading is an interaction between reader and text. Interpretation occurs because of the interaction. Thus history is affected by writers and readers who are always changing.

In the spirit of this kind of open learning, Ms. Gail Kurdziel wrote that, when her fifth graders studied Colonial American history, some pretended they were George Washington. They were to write a letter to Martha right after they

had fought Valley Forge. Or children were to elect to be Martha. Ms. Kurdziel had children interact with historical decisions by telling them to pretend they were famous people who try for a better solution to a specific problem. In this way the halo which surrounds famous personages was shattered. Children saw those supposed "Greats" as people who pondered over decisions, sometimes even erring. And most recently, when I spoke to a very close friend of mine who just finished her stint of student teaching to a fourth grade class, I heard my own views confirmed. Ms. Deborah Overstreet said that, in order to get her students personally involved in learning about Colonial America, she spent 10 minutes every day reading them The Witch of Blackbird Pond. Then she had students write journals as if they were living alongside Kit and Nat (characters in this book). Without realizing it her students were learning several skills at once: history, writing, and reading. They were becoming personally involved.

Most of my elementary and high school teachers, unconsciously or otherwise, rejected the notion of student involvement. One was supposed to remain detached from study. One was to make oneself into a glass beaker all readied for the precious liquid of information to enter into one's waiting body. My teachers devalued the personal just as they refused to allow the pronoun "I" in a paper unless I was writing what was classified as a personal narrative, which was somehow lower in order than an objective paper. They refused to admit oral stories as part of history since clearly they weren't written form and they hadn't the authority that comes with black print on a white page inside a thick book put out by a major publisher. In this paper I speak about how social studies and language arts teachers can enliven and enrich history

studies through personalization. Much of this kind of approach ultimately depends upon our realizing that history is not merely a time line or a sequence of events depending upon cause and effect. History is not merely empirical in nature. For a child to see history and get a feel for history, a child must see history itself as having a spirit as well as a body.

With this in mind, I conclude this essay by relating an exercise which I did with my students. I borrowed the exercise from Carol Heinze who offered this as a means for "helping students express themselves" (493). Children draw their own map which is their own soul country. Events of their life become the volcanoes or land forms or bodies of water. In my class we used a Michigan map. My students used the upper peninsula for high points and the lower for emotionally low times. They built train tracks and bridges and showed themselves moving through time. Two of my students brought this in to a fourth grade classroom where it became an exercise which combined personal history with geography. One of the children, seeming to understandhow much historical change meant soul change, wrote on his map words like "Came home from school. No one was home" or "Bad got sick" or "Ruff" (for rough) or "Just because". Interestingly enough, the map allowed this particular child, a non-writer by nature, to open up. Seeing his life as having some history, delighted the boy and made him feel confident. It is a small step for a child to say then that historical movement of self is part of history's own soul changing. To understand history we must, in some ways, explore individual souls. Otherwise history becomes a kind of Lazarus, forever waiting to feel life again.

ENDNOTES

[1] In her text Lessons From a Child (Chapter 23) Lucy Calkins explores the problem of report writing in the elementary classroom. Children, using reference books to research information, tended to adopt the voice of the reference book. They understood that, if they changed some words, substituting things like "the *spotted* fawn" for "the dappled fawn" they weren't plagiarizing (165). She, as well as the in-class teacher, Mrs. Currier, told children they were "to read simpler books first, gaining a grasp of their subjects before they tackled denser texts" (162). Consequently, children learned to talk and write in their own voices.

[2] The author Jean Fritz, this year's winner of the Orbis Pictus prize for her work in historical biography, also has written many texts which personalize famous historical persons. Language used in these texts is accessible to children and invites interaction. Fritz's invitation to interaction is obvious even from some of her titles i.e. What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?. Children search to find out what the really big idea is. All along Fritz tells of the "smaller" though no lesser ideas.

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